



Town of Arlington, Massachusetts
730 Massachusetts Ave., Arlington, MA 02476
Phone: 781-316-3000

webmaster@town.arlington.ma.us

Accountability Minutes 05/20/2008

Approved Minutes for Tuesday, May 20, 2008 Meeting
of the
District Accountability Subcommittee
of the
Arlington School Committee

School Committee Room, Arlington, Massachusetts

Present: Joseph A. Curro, Jr., Subcommittee Chair
Joseph E. Curran, Subcommittee Member
Leba Heigham, Subcommittee Member
Nate Levenson, Superintendent of Schools

The Subcommittee Chair called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m.

Overview of Mission

Mr. Curro led a discussion reviewing the mission and work of the Subcommittee and distributed the District Accountability grid that is currently in place. He noted that all three Subcommittee members are new to this task, and that he had therefore consulted last year's Subcommittee Chair, Mr. Thielman, for an overview.

The District Accountability Subcommittee is charged with developing for the upcoming school year tasks and measures that will demonstrate progress in fulfilling district goals. The Subcommittee also evaluates progress in carrying out current year goals and reports its findings to the full School Committee for approval. Most work of the Subcommittee is carried out in conjunction with the Superintendent of Schools.

Review of Current Year Goals

The Superintendent gave an overview of the way in which this process worked last year. Tasks for the upcoming school year were worked on throughout the preceding summer.

Many tasks call for June 30 deliverables. As a result, much of the documentation needed to demonstrate progress toward goals and tasks is pulled together over the summer. Documentation is released to the Subcommittee in the form of several data packets. The first set of documentation will likely contain various survey results.

The Superintendent reminded the Subcommittee that when this process was first introduced, his pay was tied to the results, but that this is no longer the case. The process is now aimed at measuring progress of the district as a whole.

There has been some mixed feedback about the level of task detail that is presented to the full School Committee for consideration. Discussion ensued about the best way to schedule and "chunk out" discussions around task-setting and the measurement of progress. Subcommittee Chair Curro indicated that he would consult with School Committee Chair Denise Burns regarding the scheduling of these discussions for full committee review.

In order to inform the setting of new tasks, Ms. Heigham noted that it would make sense to have as much information as possible before the commencement of the next school year. Mr. Curran pointed out that Subcommittee's hands are tied in carrying out its work until anticipated data comes back.

The Superintendent stated that he plans to give data to the Subcommittee in large chunks. He indicated that the

Subcommittee might want to bring in principals and others to verify anything that is presented and that it is an appropriate role for the Subcommittee to “dig in” in this way. Mr. Levenson pointed out that no one is going to agree on all goals and tasks, and that – while he personally likes this level of scrutiny – it is still a relatively new process for many administrators.

The Subcommittee Chair reiterated that the work of the Subcommittee will ultimately go to the full School Committee for a vote. Ms. Heigham suggested taking a “broad brush” approach in our presentations. Mr. Curran noted that community concerns tend to raise flags around specific items.

The Superintendent stated that one copy of every piece of supporting documentation will be deposited in the office of the Executive Secretary to the School Committee to facilitate public inspection. He noted that many of the discussions with the School Committee in the past revolved around the appropriateness of specific measures and that it may be possible to handle each stage of the prospective task review and progress measurement in single sittings of the Committee.

Mr. Levenson estimated that some documentation around the measurement of current progress will be available by June 20. By the end of July, 90% of such documentation should be ready. Proper review of this material will likely necessitate one Subcommittee meeting per month over the summer.

Setting of Goals and Tasks for the Upcoming Year

The Superintendent stated his belief that the School Committee has an important role in setting goals, but not necessarily in writing them. He related that in the first year of this process, he met with the School Committee and then with administrators, between which he found a lot of overlap in vision. Mr. Levenson also consulted faculty in the goal-setting process.

The Superintendent underscored that from year to year, the highest-level goals tend to stay fairly static.

The timetable for this year anticipates a June 6 meeting between the Superintendent and top administrators. On June 20, a retreat between the Superintendent and the School Committee is planned. In July, Mr. Levenson will work further with administrators.

A draft of new district goals will come back to the full School Committee for one or two passes. The Superintendent will then take this draft to staff and parents. Mr. Levenson noted that as this process has become institutionalized, attendance at staff and parent forums has dropped off.

The Superintendent stated that the district goal-setting process has never completed before October. He also pointed out that School Committee Chair Burns is interested in incorporating a more formal method of prioritization into the process.

Subcommittee Chair Curro asked about the role of School Improvement Plans (SIPs) in the process, and highlighted the fact that these are not due until July 1. Mr. Levenson said that the SIPs should be feeding from district goals.

Ms. Heigham asked whether we should be considering the concurrent measurement of one year’s goals and development of the next year’s goals. The Superintendent tended to agree, while noting some of the obstacles to this; he also stressed the feeling of ownership and level of commitment by his leadership team to this process.

Ms. Heigham noted that the process seemed like a vicious circle. She wondered how it was possible to adequately address professional development. Mr. Levenson said that this was typically taken up at his July administrators retreat. Ms. Heigham pointed out the difficulty of lining up outside providers for the next year at such a late date. The Superintendent responded that the district does not rely too heavily on such providers, but that he has made special accommodations outside the ordinary timeline in order to secure the services of providers, who are particularly in demand.

Ms. Heigham opined that the district accountability process would work best if staff were working against new goals from the first day of their arrival in the new school year. It is important to get teacher feedback before the previous school year is over. Ms. Heigham suggested the creation of a master timeline.

The Subcommittee Chair pointed to the excellent policy calendar that lays out School Committee and district deadlines, many of which are driven by regulatory requirements. He suggested this might serve as a template or overlay to the timeline proposed by Ms. Heigham.

Mr. Curran asked how many reports we must prepare for the Department of Education each year. The Superintendent responded that there are 4 to 5 major reports and approximately 126 others. He stated that he puts together documentation for the Subcommittee as key information comes in.

Ms. Heigham expressed the importance of taking into account MCAS data as one component for goal-setting. The Superintendent responded that we have tended to rely on district-generated measures, but that it might be fair to roll in some external measures like MCAS.

Ms. Heigham asked about the Superintendent's statement that goals should remain long-term, wondering how appropriate goals are that remain on the list long-term. Mr. Levenson responded that as we get better with some goals, it might be appropriate to drop some out; however, we need to stick with things for at least three years, if we are to apply sufficient concentration to them.

Ms. Heigham asked if this meant that the work on the goals for next year was already half-done. The Superintendent affirmed this, stating that we know our next steps.

The Subcommittee Chair asked if a one-year cycle was appropriate in view of the three-year cycle governing so much else, such as School Committee terms and the Superintendent's contract. Mr. Curran pointed out that collective bargaining agreements also run for three years.

The Superintendent responded that it might make sense to add a column to the accountability grid. He said that if we take the longer view, Ms. Heigham's suggestion of a master timetable might fit into the process more easily.

Picking up on this theme, Ms. Heigham noted that in June – after the MCAS “hump” – teachers often start thinking about the coming year and that a June 1 draft of the next year's goals might not be inappropriate.

The Subcommittee Chair asked if the process typically incorporates “stretch goals.” The Superintendent responded that people should feel reasonably confident of their ability to achieve at least 75-80% of their goals. He stressed that buy-in from those charged with implementing goals is very important. The School Committee's job is to introduce “creative tension.”

Ms. Heigham asked if we wish to encourage more risk-taking and “pie in the sky” thinking. Mr. Levenson responded that there would have to be mutual passion and a plan to help people achieve their goals, if such a plan were to succeed. Mr. Curran underscored the importance of giving people input into their own goals.

Ms. Heigham stated that she would love to see greatness reflected in our goals, accompanied by realistic measures.

Next Meetings

Subcommittee members and the Superintendent tentatively agreed on the following dates for the summer's meetings:

- Tuesday, June 27, 6:30 – 7:30 p.m. (immediately preceding the regular School Committee meeting)
- Thursday, July 31, 5:00 – 7:00 p.m.
- Thursday, August 28, 4:00 – 6:00 p.m.

Adjournment

On motion of Mr. Curran, seconded by Ms. Heigham, the Subcommittee voted unanimously to adjourn at 9:12 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Joseph A. Curro, Jr., Chair

District Accountability Subcommittee